

José Ortega y Gasset and the Practice of Philosophy

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Although much of his work has long been available in translation, the English-speaking world has generally shown little interest in José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955). Perhaps this neglect is at least partly due to the fact that he tends to be seen as a particularly Spanish philosopher. It is certainly true that a number of his works have specifically Spanish themes, and that he was an acute critic of his own country and culture. However, just as Ortega spent many of his years outside Spain, so his writings ranged far beyond the local concerns of the Iberian peninsula. In the opinion of Albert Camus, 'Ortega y Gasset, after Nietzsche, is perhaps the greatest "European" writer, and yet it would be difficult to be more Spanish.'

Although he occupied the chair of metaphysics at the University of Madrid for over a quarter of a century, Ortega was no ivory-tower academic. His father was a publisher, and he followed in the family tradition. He wrote for a number of journals and helped to found two new ones, including the prestigious and influential *La Revista de Occidente*. For several years he was an active politician. He gave public lectures and contributed many articles to newspapers. Indeed, his best known work, *The Revolt of the Masses* (first published in 1930) grew out of a series of such articles.

The book's opening lines read: 'There is one fact which, whether for good or ill, is of utmost importance in the public life of Europe at the present moment. This fact is the accession of the masses to complete social power' (Ortega y Gasset 1957, p. 11). Although he was a staunch republican, this is no celebration of the advance of democracy. 'The masses' are not a political or social class but rather 'the average' (p. 13). The dominant type in contemporary culture is 'the spoiled child of human history' (p. 98) who 'does not represent a new civilisation struggling with a previous one, but a mere negation' (p. 190). Elsewhere, in *The Origin of Philosophy* (Ortega y Gasset 1967, pp. 24-5) he observes: 'Indubitably since 1800 philosophy has progressively ceased to be a component of general culture and hence a present historical factor. Never before in Europe's history has this happened.'

Much of Ortega's work can be understood as a response to these two facts, the rise of the masses and the decline of philosophy. One of his aims was to understand the problems his society faced, another was to try and solve them. He was a shrewd observer of his times, and one of a number of intellectuals who sought to bring about a Spanish cultural revival. However, his special interests were in philosophy, and he saw the Western philosophical tradition as a shared European heritage. In his writings and in his lectures he sought to reconnect his contemporaries with this lost (or rejected) heritage. For

this reason, he primarily wrote for a wide audience. Of all his books, perhaps only *The Idea of Principle in Leibnitz and the Evolution of Deductive Theory* (Ortega y Gasset, 1971) is a conventional academic work. Several of them originated in his lectures and only reached the printed page years after they were delivered.

It is difficult to summarise the content of Ortega's philosophy. He was not particularly interested in presenting systematic expositions of it, and in any event it changed over time. Labels such as objectivism, perspectivism and ratio-vitalism have been applied to it, all with some justice no doubt, but they seem to me to shed little light on the true nature of the Ortegian enterprise. Although he certainly had his own views, I am inclined to think that he set little real store by whether or not he persuaded people to become objectivists, perspectivists or any other kind of -ists. To my mind, he was much more concerned with getting people to see the point and value of philosophy, and to begin to philosophise themselves. This is why he was more interested in writing for the mass media than for his fellow academics. There was little to be achieved by preaching to the converted.

There are many different ways of understanding what it means to practise philosophy, and perhaps it is not obvious why Ortega should be thought of as a practical philosopher. However, to my mind he was one much in the same way that Socrates was one. They both sought to engage their contemporaries in the activity of philosophising, they both called others to the examined life. They both did this not for personal advancement but because they believed that it profoundly mattered. Their philosophy was their life, their life was their practice.

References

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